

Meanderings: A Utah place where paces mingle

By Dennis Smith

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WALLSBURG, Wasatch County — This valley tucked into gentle, rolling hills south of Deer Creek Reservoir was known as Little Warm Valley by the Indians. It was renamed Round Valley by 20 families of settlers led by William Wall, who built a fort here in 1862. The town became Wallsburg.

In the center of town is Elmo Ford's Mercantile. It was built in 1890 by a cooperative of five men and bought from them by Elmo's father in 1919. Elmo took it over after his father's death and has kept it going since.

When I opened the screen door and walked in, Elmo was sitting on a chair next to a heater in the middle of the room. It was like going back to Marsh's Store in Alpine when I was a kid. Elmo had never let modern shelves and merchandise stir up or crowd out the spirit of an age otherwise almost gone. That spirit brought back forgotten feelings.

The main light fixture hangs on a single strand. New shoe boxes cuddle next to high-top leather shoes with hook eyes. On a high shelf is a beautiful old dye cabinet, a gasoline lamp that Elmo studied in the light of as

a boy, and an old telephone that once relayed messages to everyone in town. Elmo used to take phone messages to the sheepmen who brought their sheep to range in the hills south of Wallsburg. He got his first pair of leather gloves for taking a message to a shepherd.

A young boy about 11 with a baseball cap and a T-shirt with a logo on it comes in, goes over to the cooler and gets a bottle of Pepsi — one of the new, stubby bottles with the twist-off cap and plastic wrapping on it.

"That'll be 35 cents," says Elmo.

The boy reaches deep into his front Levi's pocket for change and lays it on the well-worn counter.

"Thanks, Kevin."

"Thanks, Elmo."

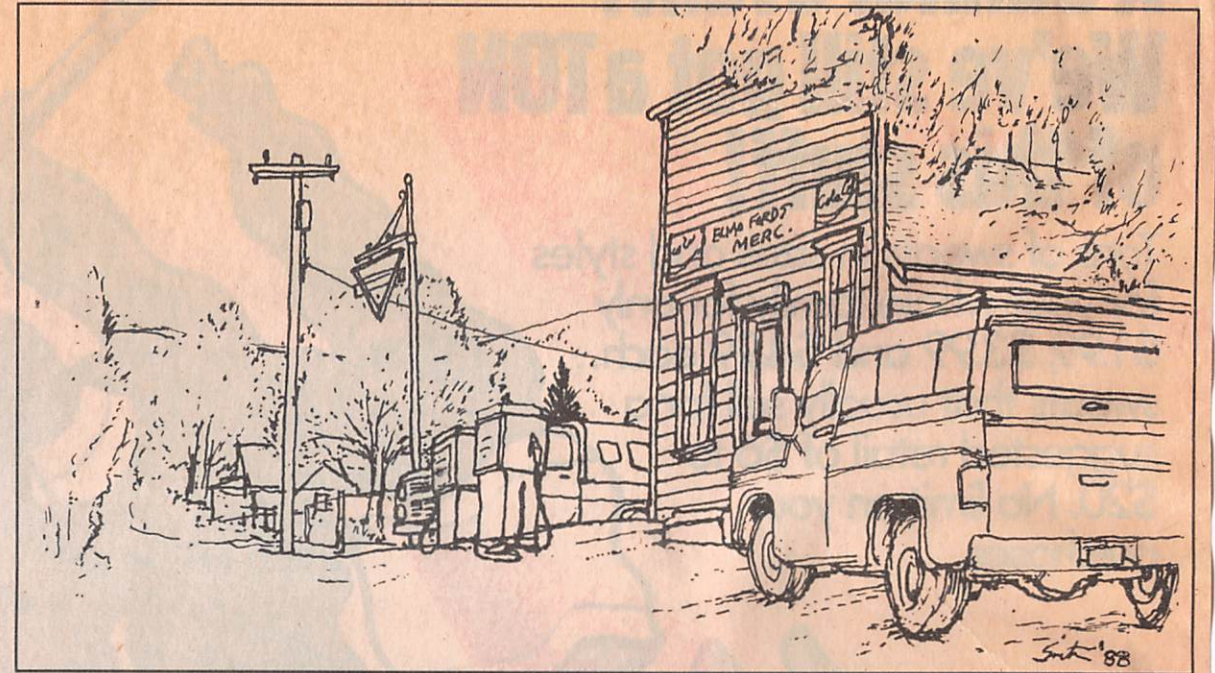
There is something very small town and nostalgic about this exchange. As the boy leaves the store, the sound of his voice saying, "Thanks, Elmo," is still echoing in my ear. There was something delicate about it that I couldn't quite put my finger on, something very telling about the space between generations, about things seen the same but, at the same time, seen very

differently.

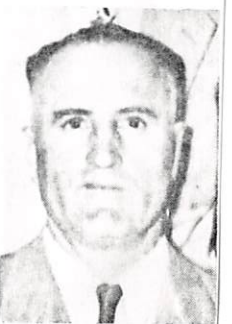
Like the pace of things. The pace of things here is about half what it is in Salt Lake City. Yet the pace of Salt Lake is about half that again of L.A. Like Elmo and Kevin's voices, all of these paces are mixed in us. It's just that in Elmo Ford's Merc the paces seem so

abruptly juxtaposed — a spool cabinet next to a box of Wheat Thins, Elmo next to Kevin, the sound of a Wallsburg clock next to an incoming radio signal advertising water beds.

■ Dennis Smith is an artist and writer living in Highland.



ILLUSTRATION/ DENNIS SMITH



Elmo A. Ford